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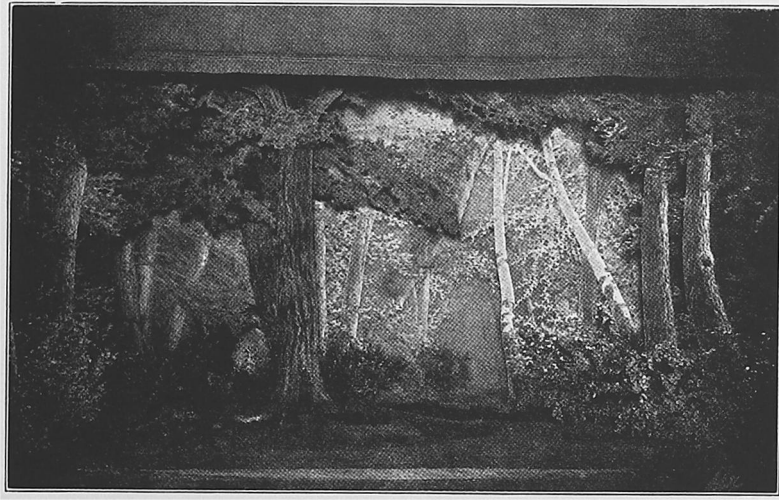
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Third Act setting of "Children of Earth" without stage lighting.



Photos, Courtesy of Winthrop Ames

The same setting with stage lights on.

THE VALUE OF STAGE LIGHTING.

FORE-STAGE AND STAGE PICTURE

“TRULY, most scenery for several centuries has been devised, partly at least, to gain a simple end that frequently has been lost sight of in scenic estimate—to hide the secret regions of the stage. This accomplished, much scenery has stopped there. In all events, the necessity of hiding the walls seems tacitly admitted everywhere and at all times.”

Along in 1914 Granville Barker—by his own statement largely guided by Gordon Craig—made his London production of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” which was subsequently brought to New York. In response to the vast amount of criticism to which he was subjected—an experience duplicated in the American metropolis—he stated that he simply would not have “realistic” scenery.

“For one thing,” he said, “it is violently at odds with everything in the plays themselves, and for another it is never realistic. In the second place, I do not care to go in for an exact reproduction of the Elizabethan stage. Historical accuracy, which is its sole virtue, is wasted on a present-day audience. And so we have come to adopt a conventional decorative background, one that will reflect light and suggest space; and to this we have added, where necessary, something which, while formal and decorative, will suggest whatever of the garden green or of the out-of-doors is needed.”

In a unique “review” Royal Cortissoz, the eminent critic, expressed a happy conception of the so-called “fourth wall”

of the stage. This conception seemed absolutely new. It ran to the effect that instead of the fourth wall being located *at the curtain line*, as an imaginary boundary for the scene, the stage scene itself, regarded in all its length and breadth and thickness, *is the fourth wall of the auditorium*.

This is amplified in a much earlier expression of Percy Fitzgerald’s, in his interesting collection of papers entitled “The World Behind the Scenes.” “Spectators have a kind of power of being present in a sort of supernatural way, and are, as it were, in company with the figures. The scenery is for them but an indication, as some background is necessary for a statue, or as we look from a window on a landscape. We are in the room, listening and looking on, but in no particularly defined locality.”

These quotations are from “Play Production in America,” by Arthur Edwin Krows, and published by Henry Holt and Company.

If now we regard the proscenium as a frame upon the fourth wall, the scenery and action on the stage become a picture in which the characters are endowed with life and speech. Should the actor ever step out of this picture, should opportunity be afforded him to come before the frame?

We had not thought of its happening again so long ago, but rather regarded it as a recent innovation; but Mr. Krows writes that from time to time in the past thirty years or more, the stage picture has emerged upon an extended apron

from the frame, in which in the course of centuries it had become set with so much difficulty. Upon this apron actors come forward in much the old manner and discussed their affairs.

At first it seemed like the mere overlapping of tradition, and so excited comparatively little comment; but, with the more recent appearance of the platform stage in America in the 1914 revivals by Margaret Anglin, in the revivals by Annie Russell—who used work of Grace Olmsted Clarke, said to be the only woman who literally painted scenery in addition to designing it—and, more particularly, in the 1915 productions of Granville Barker in New York, it was hailed as a distinct step forward in the “new art” of the stage.

In use for action, it gains something in coming down a couple of steps to a ground below the stage level; and this is found in Europe in one of the theatres of Max Reinhardt, who uses it to further his theory of intimacy, and in America in the 1915 productions of Barker. One of its advantages was particularly evident in Barker’s interpretation of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” where the nobles at the “play within the play” occupied the foreground and the action could readily be seen over their heads.

It appears that the proscenium arch may be too far removed from the front of the stage or too ill-defined. When Charles Dillingham assumed control of the New York Hippodrome, in 1915, he realized that the existing arch which was located almost at the extreme back of the stage, leaving the stage floor itself projecting in a vast semicircle out into the audience, made the stage picture somewhat far off from the spectator, while the players, necessarily stepping out of the picture, tended to destroy the illusion. So a false proscenium arch was built much

further front; and it was surprising how much the intimacy was increased, while they were enabled to create an illusion of great depth by building scenery at the sides, far out on the stage.

Yet, in maintaining the neutrality of the ground as an intermediate strip between the world of Reality and Make-Believe, there may be times when the significance of the play comes closer home in bringing the characters forward.

Thus, in “Sumurûn,” the production made first by Reinhardt in Europe and then imported to America by Winthrop Ames, the idea that all the characters were only pretending their bloody tale was emphasized (to prevent the audience taking it too seriously) by using a pathway from the audience to the stage, upon which the fantastic figures made their first entrances. This pathway was welcomed as an innovation in the theatre; but it really was an adaptation of a convention of the old Chinese theatre, where the audience is even more frankly asked to pretend. The pathway there is used to indicate that characters come from a distance. All through “Sumurûn” the audience, when likely to become appalled at the series of gruesome murders, is reminded that the characters are but puppets, and not to take them too seriously, by the dreamland scenery, the procession of shadows, and when the hunchback, alone among the litter of bodies, at the very end, motions the curtain down.

Here, then, is what appears the true principle in all this shifting back and forth over the curtain line: There are plays where a fore-stage is pertinent and plays where it is not; and these misconceptions that would keep a fore-stage as conventional ground, in acting use, throughout a repertory of plays ranging from imagery to stark realism, are not to be followed.